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ABSTRACT

Literacy is a social process. Each person constructs his or her own "literate identity" and each community constructs its own "literate culture." At times, this local and individual process is at odds with literacy development on a large scale, undertaken through social intervention. Such social intervention is counter-social in that by trying to accelerate change, it violates the basic social character of the literacy process at the individual and local levels. Literacy workers in local communities must reconcile national visions and objectives with local needs. They must ensure that intervention on behalf of literacy at higher levels (regional or national) reflects the reality of literacy development as a social process. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PROCESS; LITERACY AS A SOCIAL INTERVENTION

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Introduction

The argument of this paper can be stated as follows: Literacy is a social process. Each person constructs his or her own "literate identity" and each community constructs its own "literate culture". However, these constructions take place within a reality that is already half-constructed. The world is, of course, both "found" and "made".

There are several agents responsible for the pre-construction of reality, that is, responsible for the world already made. Policy makers and planners at the international, national and sub-regional levels are among such agents. As social interventionists, these policy makers and planners put templates on the flux called reality, seeking to promote particular patterns and modes of constructions by individuals and local communities as the latter engage in encounters with their world. Thus, the process of design of social intervention from the policy maker's perspective must, by necessity, involve clustering social entities, structuring social processes, abstracting from the concreteness of life, generalizing to arrive at typicalities, and standardizing inputs and strategies in achieving results. In so doing, the social interventionist loses on the side of the richness of "thick descriptions" of individual constructions but gains by finding "flat but fertile" descriptions of larger patterns of social reality.

At the implementation stage, the process of social intervention design is made to stand on its own head. The already half-constructed part of the reality is once again reconstructed by individuals in their encounters with the "induced" social intervention. National policy is then joined with individual praxis.

Literacy workers in local communities must avail of their share of the allocation of material and professional resources made available through national and subregional initiatives, reconciling national visions with local community needs. This should, of course, be done by supplementing and complementing nationally designed curricula and materials with locally designed curricula and materials. The challenge for literacy workers is to ensure that national or subregional intervention on behalf of literacy, which in and of itself is a social process, reflects the reality of literacy as a social process; and that, at the moment of joining policy with praxis, the individual learner is enabled to maximize his or her freedom of individual social construction of reality.

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Some assumptions clarified

On the eve of the International Literacy Year, 1990, there is considerable literacy discussion and at least some literacy action on the ground. In the area of literacy discussion, both the "ideological" and the "technological" are being examined. The discussion of the technology of literacy covers questions of development and design of systems of literacy instruction at the local, regional and national levels. The discussion of the ideological, predictably, encompasses questions concerning the interface of systems of literacy instructions with the larger social systems and structures. Questions are being raised about the purposes of literacy initiatives, the social and economic uses of literacy, and its political and structural consequences. In the area of literacy actions, there are serious policy questions: At what levels and points in the social system should policy initiatives be generated? What should be the nature of relationships between the nation State and the local community, and between the governmental and non-governmental institutions? How could literacy as a social process be accelerated, if at all? Whose purposes do national campaigns, radical or otherwise, serve and could be made to serve?

Discussion of policy issues listed above is value-laden. A clarification of our value assumptions is, therefore, necessary:

The nature and level of our knowledge about social systems is such that social interventions *can*, often if not always, be made within social systems for preferred social outcomes.

That both our social philosophies and existential social conditions often compel that social interventions should be made within social systems for preferred social outcomes.

That universal literacy is a preferred future for all humanity.

That the universalization of literacy will affect all other social, economic and political systems and structures and thereby lead to a better world of peace and prosperity.

The assumptions stated above are not accepted by all. But that is only half the problem. The other half of the problem is that the technology of social interventions is not well understood either. That creates unnecessary conceptual confusion that spills over into literacy actions.

Literacy and Social Change

Change for change sake is not acceptable, of course. But social change, defined as "good" according to some normative criteria is often sought. Two normative criteria of good change are finding wide acceptance: that social change must include modernization and it is thus a material project; and that social change must include democratization and it is thus a moral project. This does not settle much in relation to the literacy and social change connection. The posited connection between the two remains problematic to say the least.

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It is not universally assumed that literacy brings economic development and political development. The assignment of such a role to literacy is considered to be no more than pursuing a myth (Gradd, 1979). The assertion has indeed been made that development comes first and then, in turn, creates the need for literacy. People are then seen as responding to these new literacy requirements.

On the other hand, there have been some compelling claims on behalf of literacy. Jack Goody (1968) has proposed "the technology of intellect" hypothesis which states that literacy (particularly writing) changes the mentalities of new literates, thereby changing their modes of perceiving, remembering, arguing, and communicating. Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, Jerome Bruner and David Olson have all talked of the effects of literacy on cognition (Kintgen, Kroll & Rose, 1988; Olson, 1985; Ong, 1977).

More recent work seems to put things in a perspective. At the level of cognition, Scribner and Cole (1981), have modified the Goody hypothesis to suggest that earlier claims about the effects of literacy may have been too general, but that more specific consequences do emerge within the particular context of the practice of literacy. Thus, while literacy may not install a brand new technology of intellect, there is no doubt that a brand new social identity is conferred.

At the societal level, the literacy and social change connection in our times is visible even to the naked eye. Literacy does not deterministically bring about development, but it is almost impossible to conceive of development without literacy. There clearly is a mutually beneficial dialectical relationship between literacy and social change. Literacy is not a panacea, but it certainly is "potential added" to individual capacities of new literates whereby they can make more effective translations with all aspects of their environments - economic, social, political, informational, educational and cultural.

Literacy as a Social Process

With the epistemic paradigm shifting from positivism to constructionism, long anticipated in Burger & Luckmann (1966), it is not surprising that literacy has come to be seen as a social process. There is a chorus of voices pointing to it (Heath 1982, 1984; Levine, 1986; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street 1984).

Scribner (1984) writes: "But the single most compelling fact about literacy is that it is a social achievement; individuals in societies without writing systems do not become literate. Literacy is an outcome of cultural transmission; the individual child or adult does not extract the meaning of written symbols through personal interaction with the physical objects that embody them. literacy abilities are acquired by individuals only in the course of participation in socially organized activities with written language...."

Shirley Brice Heath (1982) had brought out another aspect of literacy as a social process -- use of literacy as an occasion for social activities: "Women shopped

together, discussed local credit opportunities and products, and sales; men negotiated the meaning of tax forms, brochures on new cards, and political flyers. The evening newspaper was read on the front porch and talk about the news drifted from porch to porch.... The only occasions for solitary reading by individuals were those in which elderly men and women read their Bible or Sunday School materials alone, or school-age children sat alone to read a library book or a school assignment."

The essential meaning of literacy as a social process is that the process of becoming literate is experienced by each individual in his or her own personal terms within the special context of their social reality and the practice of literacy is likewise actualized or constrained by the special context of its use. In other words, literacy is a social process in that it has social antecedents, social correlates, and social consequences. The social antecedents determine literacy's definition and people's access to literacy; social correlates of literacy determine the allocation of opportunities and roles and, consequently, the uses and practices of literacy; and social consequences determine rewards from the practice of literacy.

Social-historical antecedents of literacy are easily described. At the world system level, it has been said that there is underdevelopment, because there is overdevelopment. Without the history of colonization of the Third World by the West, it is conceivable that levels of illiteracy would not have been as high in the so-called Third World as they are today; and the levels of literacy would not have been as high in the developed world as they are today.

Without the process of industrialization in the world, literacy would not have been such a value. And it is because of the particular division of labour internationally that different countries have come to have different levels of functional literacy: the United States requires one level of functional literacy, Japan and Hong Kong about the same, but Botswana and Bolivia quite another level of functionality in their literacy. Within each country, the social stratification would determine how many literacies -- basic literacy, workplace literacy, cultural literacy and higher order literacy -- there would be and who would be provided and or denied what kind of literacy. Socio-cultural antecedents help us understand why there are such drastic differences in levels of literacy across genders, ethnic groups and castes in regard to the access for literacy.

The social correlates of literacy determine uses of literacy. The farmer will only be able to use literacy in reading agricultural leaflets and brochures. The already retired will be perhaps reading the Bible whereas the revolutionary will be reading materials from the underground. Finally, the consequences and, therefore, the rewards of literacy will also be socially determined. Social status will determine the social possibilities of using literacy.

What does all this mean? It does, of course, mean that literacy is not merely technical. However, it should be noted that it does not deny the fact that literacy is at the same time a technical skill. It is clear that literacy is a process intermeshed with social processes and the social organization surrounding it.

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However, it need not imply that the existing social realities are immutable and the social process of literacy itself is not amenable to the process of intervention. Social interventions can be made both in the processes of literacy acquisition and use, and in the social systems surrounding the practice of literacy, thereby, hoping to achieve preferred social outcomes and rewards. Literacy does not, of course, abolish hierarchy. The new literate on becoming literate would not instantly inherit the freedoms of the socially more privileged, but literacy will most likely provide the new literate with greater degrees of freedom relative to his or her earlier condition.

The Literacy Process Is Symbiotic

As we have risen above the positivist categories of independent and controlled variables, causalities directly and solely attributable to invariant treatments; and as we have learned to look at literacy as a social process, we have also understood that literacy does not fight with orality, it joins it. A symbiosis developed between literacy and orality that is unique to the individual that becomes literate; and unique to the collectivities where some become literate and others do not. At the same time, the illiterate copes with the literate environment by developing a complex of interdependent relationships with literacy in the family and the community.

Literacy and Media Connections

Literacy as the medium of print has developed another symbiosis: with the folk media and the electronic media. In this symbiosis with media, literacy is becoming the backbone of the structures and strategies of communication. In the first flush of enthusiasm, it had been hoped that literacy will be rendered unnecessary with the arrival of the electronic media. This has not happened. There are pragmatic reasons. TV has not reached everywhere. Radio has not reached everywhere, either; and has developed more as a medium of news and entertainment rather than of development information. Also, and most importantly, educational radio seems to be using the "grammar of print" in its broadcasts, speaking out aloud written scripts that are better understood by the literate than by the illiterate.

Literacy as a Social Intervention

We started with the acceptance of the assumptions that universal literacy is a good value and that social intervention on behalf of literacy is an acceptable value. Social interventions should, of course, be developed and designed so that they are based on the real nature of literacy, that is on the understanding of literacy as a social process.

The problem, however, is that the proponents of literacy as a social process draw from their discussion implications that show a naivete about the process of social change through planned social intervention. To begin with, the one implication that is often drawn is that somehow people should take care of the people's literacy by themselves. Literacy initiatives from the outside are rejected out of

hand as instances of dominant literacy (Street, 1984). This position, in overemphasising local initiatives and community control, loses sight of the reality of the nation State and ends up excluding the role of the national leadership.

The position is obviously extreme and unrealistic about the role of the State, and or other larger government entities. First, we know from historical experience that there is a limit to community initiatives and actions in the community's own behalf; and that most communities do need help to help themselves. Second, the concept of the locality in the old sense has disappeared. Third, the State is not, by definition, anti-people, and in many Third World countries, that State is the only important agent of transformation. Fourth, we have accepted the role of social interventions for most other sectors of social change. Why shouldn't there be a social intervention on behalf of literacy? Fifth, we too often seem to forget that national government initiatives also mean allocation of both material and professional resources. Why should communities forego their share of material resources and refuse help on such things as teacher training, and production of instructional materials? Finally, and most importantly, what are literacy-as-a-social-process people worried about anyway? Since literacy is a social construction, literacy learners will engage in their own unique constructions of their own literacy experiences whatever the State-delivered literacy may seek to purvey and produce through its particular calculus of means and ends.

The Dilemma of Social Intervention

That brings us to the dilemma of reconciling "literacy as a social process" and "literacy as a social intervention". The dilemma is that a social interventionist in developing and planning a social intervention for a whole nation or a region cannot think in terms of assisting each individual separately in the development of a new script unique to each individual construction. Nor can the social interventionist write separate scenarios for all the communities in which the people of a whole nation may be living.

The grammar of social intervention does indeed include three general steps (Bhola, 1989);

1. ordering and relating;
2. typifying and hypothesizing; and
3. experiencing and correcting

In ordering and relating, the social interventionist must in the very process cluster social entities in terms of "least common multiples" and "highest common factors", structure processes, and abstract from the concreteness of life. In the next step of the grammar, he or she must generalize to arrive at typicalities, and standardize inputs and strategies. In the very process, thick descriptions must become typical descriptions, details must be missed, individuals must become somewhat impersonalized and communities must become locations on the map. Hypotheses must be built in regard to reality now fitted into taxonomies.

The two processes described above could indeed be called "counter-social". In trying to accelerate the social process at the general level, they seem to violate the social character of the process at the individual and local levels. Fortunately, there are possibilities of amelioration at the third stage of the grammar of social intervention, that of, experiencing and correcting. This is where the impersonal part of the process of social intervention must turn around and, again become a social process rich in personal and human values. There is a possibility at this stage, through experiencing reality and through correcting misconceptions to re-invent national visions in local settings. It is possible, at this moment, to give the people blueprints that they could construct into living systems in which they themselves are the actors, speaking in their own voices, engaged in their own dialogue, actualizing their own praxis (Freire, 1970).

GO's and NGO'S; Campaigns, Programs and Projects

Typically, the literacy-as-a-social-process people are against large-scale literacy programs by the State, which they call dominant literacy. We have suggested that policy interventions have to be molar rather than molecular in their scope of coverage and somewhat standardized in objectives and strategies. However, the State need not always be considered anti-people, nor insensitive to the real concerns of its citizens. Indeed, as we have pointed out before, in many Third World countries, the State is the only agent of significant change and the only agent of transfer through budgetary allocations for development and education. We must, therefore, think not about bypassing State institutions but about creating enabling State institutions that allow "the re-invention of national initiatives in local community settings". Some diversification of initiatives can be assured through NGO's who, given good leadership, can play an important role.

The campaign approach to literacy often associated with governmental initiatives need not be rejected out of hand either. Local communities should learn to make transactions with central policy initiatives whereby they can use the national resources to fulfil their own communal interests and accelerate the social processes on the ground. After all, literacy is a social construction. What may be offered as part of the so-called hegemonic and improper literacy will again be "reconstructed". Progressive reconstructions of oppressive structures of literacy have often occurred in history and are occurring today. It happened in 18th century England: "Suddenly the rudimentary literacy skills transmitted by established purveyors of working-class education acquired highly subversive potential -- regardless of the ideological setting in which those were originally organized (Lankshear, 1987, p89-90). Thus, the oppressed were able to develop a counter hegemony. In Iran in the 1960s and the 1980s, under the Shah's rule, the process occurred again as the "Maktab literacy" became "commercial literacy" (Street, 1984). The "autonomous" and the "ideological" models of literacy got mutually reconstructed.

Two related problems: Literacy Content and Literacy Assessment

There are two further related themes that should be commented upon briefly: (1) the social content of literacy; and (2) the social assessment of literacy.

We do not simply read, we always read something. The social content of literacy, therefore, must be given due consideration. There seems to exist today a great divide between those who want to teach functional literacy for the professionalization of labour and those who want to teach literacy for liberation. In the real world, people do not make dichotomous choices between freedom and bread. They want both, in good measure, sacrificing one for the other depending upon what is possible and what price they want to pay for one or the other at a particular historical time. Literacy workers need to avoid thinking in the either/or mode and must develop a generalized concept of functionality and political awareness, all at the same time.

Another important question relates to the social assessment of literacy effects. There are several problems here. Too often the assessment processes are bureaucratic rather than social. The participation of those whose lives are being examined has no part to play. Again, the "subject" of the evaluation study is seen as an economic one. The individual as a social and cultural product is not kept in view. Within the narrow confines of economic evaluating itself, only formal economic structures are examined. The informal sector of the economy, an important socio-cultural reality, is forgotten.

These problems need redress.

Conclusion

We must understand that while literacy is an individual construction, we arrive in a world already half constructed. Individuals and communities cannot engage in social construction in a vacuum but within the context of larger social systems that have historic memory and collective meaning. Our constructions are then a dialectic between the world as we find it and the world as we make it.

In this paper, we have shown the relationship between literacy as a social process and policy intervention as a social process, both at the theoretical and the pragmatic levels. We have not rejected the government role in literacy promotion simply because it is the government that is in that role. Nor have we rejected the mass campaign and the large-scale national program as strategies for the implementation of literacy policies. This is not to say that we believe that everything is right with the world; that governments around the world today are being run by philosopher-kings who can do no harm; that we should only conduct mass literacy campaigns and national programs and never small programs in communities; or that literacy workers should stop their struggle of organizing people on their own behalf, working for critical consciousness among small learning groups, constructing their own literacies, and inventing their own worlds. On the contrary, we believe with Street (1984: 227-28) that there need to be changes in the ideology of literacy workers and institutions of literacy and there have to be meaningful changes in social, political and economic structures. All we are suggesting is that literacy workers do not get carried away with their localism and communitarianism and reject the role of the State and leadership from outside

the community. Nor should they forget the necessity of outside resources, both material and professional.

To put a sting in the tail, let us also state that while literacy is a social process, literacy does not cease to be a technology of codification and decodification of symbol systems; and, therefore, it might be much more appropriate to characterize literacy as a socio-technical process, rather than merely a social process.

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